

# Rolling with it

## An American in Mexico gets an education in ways of the world

By Mary Blye Howe

**P**uerto Vallarta, Mexico—Culture shock had hit us like hairspray in the eyes. We had walked into our motel room and stopped dead in our tracks. The curtains and bedspread glowed orange as a Mexican sunset. No carpet. No TV. Two glasses sat unwrapped by a clay pitcher on the bathroom counter. An uncomfortable wooden chair cowered in the corner and a dimly lit lamp hung between the beds.

In one aspect we felt at home, though—the washcloths were as big as towels. Just like Texas. Well, OK, they were towels. We searched in vain for hand towels, washcloths and anything over two towels for the three of us.

We soon discovered the toilet didn't work (it didn't work all week), and the maids had left only a half roll of toilet paper and a sliver of used soap. A few drops of shampoo stood in the tiny bottle on the counter.

Little wonder, then, when we bought a watermelon at Gigante's and couldn't eat it, that we carefully disguised it amid mounds of paper before putting it in the wastebasket. I still felt guilty for throwing it away.

In "Surprised by Joy" C.S. Lewis wrote, "I learned that we should attempt a total surrender to whatever atmosphere was offering itself at the moment; in a squalid town to seek out those very places where its squalor rose to grimness and almost grandeur, on a dismal day to find the most dismal and dripping wood, on a windy day to seek the windiest ridge . . . to rejoice in its being (so magnificently) what it was."

My face relaxed into a grin—I knew that finding the grandeur in this place would be our intention.

section.

"Stupid *Americanos*," we chided ourselves, remembering the line we had passed at the produce section.

### The flea market

A UMF (unidentified magnetic force) drew us several times to the flea market. And if we didn't make it to town one day, we could buy whatever we wanted on the beach. Vendors paraded up and down the shore all day with bargains priced "just for you, *señoritas*."

"Hey, beach potatoes! Wake up," a perky fellow called. "Come ride the big banana!" His shirt chided us to "not be chicken; don't be shy."

"Hey, K mart shoppers. I have blue-light special. Cheap junk! Almost free." A man appeared beside us with 25 hats and a large selection of silvery jewelry.

We felt proud when we talked the peddlers down from \$30 to \$16 for an item, but embarrassed when someone a few feet away bought the same thing for \$10. When we purchased three bracelets for \$5 that were originally \$5 apiece, we patted one another on the back. Later getting four for \$5 deflated us a little, and when we saw some for \$1 each we were completely humbled.

"Better quality," a high-priced jewelry salesman asserted as he thrust a suitcase full of bangles in our faces. "Real silver. They have Mexican silver." He nodded toward his fellow merchants contemptuously and displayed a few identical bracelets.

"You can't sell real silver for that price," one of us scoffed.

"How you know? You make it?" he responded.

One aggressive salesman got my attention with a cheap, but pretty, bracelet-and-earrings set. When he told me the cost I began to walk away. "Ay yi yi! Too much," I

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## Transportation

Although the tourist rep recommended we take taxis to and from town, my friends and I had no desire to stand out as tourists. So dressed in matching Puerto Vallarta T-shirts, straw hats purchased at the flea market and dripping with Mexican silver, we hopped a bus.

After handing the driver 900 pesos for the three of us, we squeezed ourselves in. I grabbed onto a pole as the driver stepped on the gas pedal and flung us all backwards. The pole was corroded at the top and had detached itself from the ceiling, so I lunged for another.

Pasted on the windshield of the bus were two pictures of the Virgin Mary, one of Christ on the cross and another of the baby Jesus in the manger. A St. Christopher medal hung on a chain over the driver's rear-view mirror.

As passengers reached their destination and climbed out the back door, we moved toward the back, walking carefully around a large hole in the floor.

Gigante's was a market we visited almost daily for snacks, lunch meat and ice for our cooler. At the meat counter, the woman waited patiently while we looked at the choices, lying in piles on a table. We chose what we hoped was ham.

At the checkout stand the young man shoved our produce to the side and began sounding a bell loud enough to summon help from three countries away. Unfortunately it didn't bring any assistance from 3 feet away, so the checker disappeared for 10 minutes. He returned with everything weighed and priced at the produce

told him.

"How much you want to pay?" he persisted.

"Five dollars," I said.

"Ay yi yi! Too little! Give me 8."

"No, 5."

"Give me 7."

"No, 5."

"Give me 6."

"No, 5."

"Give me the money."

Another asked us, "Where you from?"

"Texas," we told him.

"Texas! Howdy!"

## And those tours . . .

Our third day we purchased a day cruise. The brochure promised our vessel would have a large deck for sunbathing, breakfast on the boat and dinner, volleyball and snorkeling at our destination. But we weren't surprised when something that looked like a large pontoon boat pulled into the harbor for us. And we *did* like the tart slices of pineapple, cantaloupe and bananas they served for breakfast.

"Señoritas swim to shore or go on boat?" José, our host, asked us when we arrived a half-mile from the shore of our destination. We laughed at his "joke," but when we saw the other four Mexican passengers jumping from the boat into the water we hurried to let José help us into the motorboat waiting to take us to the shore of La Cruz.

Balancing himself with one foot on the pontoon and the other on the johnboat that hummed in impatience waiting for us, José helped us all step, wobbling, onto the seat. We lowered our backsides onto the muddy seat and gripped the sides of the boat as our captain peeled out and motorized us

# American Summertime Tradition.



to shore.

The few people enjoying the tiny beach at La Cruz moved hastily to the side as we beached at top speed.

The restaurant where we were to eat lunch stood a few feet from shore. A grass roof sheltered several picnic tables, a fire in a grill leapt up to snatch the fish laid out across the wire tray and a tiny outhouse sat crookedly a few yards away.

A bathroom. Thank goodness. I expected a filthy wooden hole as I made my way across the sand, but having been on a boat eating fruit for the last three hours, I didn't care. Surprisingly, the dilapidated wooden door opened to a clean, modern toilet.

Some minutes later I returned to the restaurant and asked where I could wash my hands. A young man led me by the arm over to a large metal vat filled with clean water. He guided my hands over the basin while he ladled water over them with his other hand.

"Do you have soap?" I asked. "Soap?" he glanced over at me, puzzled. "No soap."

#### A private tour

June through September is the rainy season in the area—it rains nearly every day—and the Rio Grande de Santiago rises and forces its muddy water into the ocean. With barely an inch of visibility, the most we did with our snorkels was tote them from the boat to the shore.

So, after a delicious lunch of grilled grouper rolled up in a tortilla with rice and hot sauce, we persuaded our host to give us a private tour of the area. That was without a doubt the most fascinating part of our vacation.

Barefoot and coated with a thin layer of sand, we walked along the path through a thick growth of green into the heart of La Cruz. A lizard scurried across the path in front of us and two scrawny dogs sniffed desperately down the hill by a tiny creek for something to put into their stomachs.

Women nursed babies everywhere—in the corner drugstore, on wicker chairs in back yards, in the doorways of their homes and under trees on street corners. Several of them waved at us and Jose said, "Sister." (He told us he had 11 sisters and three brothers, all living in La Cruz.)

We stood in front of Jose's home. The dirt yard had been swept and not even a leaf was on it.

We stepped down two stone steps into an open patio. Directly in front of us two holes carved neatly in the stone offered us a look into the bedrooms where

comfortable-looking beds and shelves for clothes sat. The wooden shutters shoved back from the opening provided a bit of privacy from the rest of the house.

A table on the patio held a large metal container that warmed water for baths. Logs held up the tin roof throughout the house and the cool, stone floors in every room felt clean and smooth under our bare feet. A new GE washer stood toward the back of the house, evidently paid for by Jose's tourist work in Puerto Vallarta.

We stared in wonderment as Jose turned to us, his eyes sparkling and his arms outspread, much as a baritone poses when he hits his climactic note. "You like?" he asked.

"We love," I told him enthusiastically and sincerely. "We love your country. We love your people. Thank you so much for sharing this with us."

#### Achieving rapport

Our inability to speak Spanish was both our biggest obstacle and one of our biggest laughs. For instance, one day I went to the front desk to ask about washing my towel, bathing suit and a couple of other things. "I'd like to wash some clothes," I said. The young clerk wore a puzzled expression.

After a few more attempts, his countenance brightened and he perked, "Si! How many?"

"Probably five," I responded. "How much?"

His face creased with a frown. "Free, senorita." Two hours later, a maid appeared at our door with five washcloths.

On our first day we had set out to find a grocery. "Where can we buy groceries?" we asked a lobby attendant. His mind worked to translate but nothing came and he looked at us and shook his head. "Groceries. Food. Want to buy meat and bread and potato chips," we urged. "Oh! Si! Just go down here and turn right at corner and turn here and there and here and there. Not far," he informed. We found ourselves at a restaurant.

#### Time to leave

"How do you say 'sad' in Spanish?" we asked our driver en route to the airport at the end of our stay in Puerto Vallarta, which we felt sad to leave.

"Sad?" he looked at us, puzzled.

"Yes, sad, like ..." and we made unhappy faces to help him.

He gazed at us, bewildered. "Sad? Don't know sad," he said.

We smiled. Somehow I wasn't at all surprised. ●

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